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MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: My Meeting with Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy, February 21, 1970

I met with Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy near Paris for about seven hours on February 21. It was a significant meeting. We had a frank exchange of views. They basically accepted our proposed procedure for future private meetings, dropped their preconditions for substantive negotiations, and gave the impression of being much more ready for business than before.

I will send you a separate memorandum on where we go from here.

I. What Happened

-- I presented our prepared statement during the almost three-hour morning session. The remainder of the morning I rebutted some of their statements, replied to questions, and had them clarify some elements of their position.

-- During the morning session, Xuan Thuy produced a very perfunctory speech full of standard accusations with some interesting omissions (see below). In the afternoon session, Le Duc Tho made a long, rather defensive speech in which he rejected my statement that our situation had improved and claimed that in fact it had deteriorated. He even claimed that we had lost the war. He then proceeded to accept most of our suggestions for the format of future meetings, and to accept some rather significant changes in their position with just a minimum of face-saving.

-- The atmosphere during the meeting was remarkably frank and free of trivia. Tho readily agreed to the proposed time for the next meeting. He did not appear to have a prepared statement, suggesting that he had some latitude on what he could accept. His long speech was apparently triggered by my suggesting that our position had improved since my August meeting with Xuan Thuy.

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E.O. 12958, Sec. 3.5
NSC Memo, 11/24/98, State Dept. Guidelines
By lk, NARA, Date 12/20/99

II. What Was Agreed

-- To continue private talks in this channel.

-- On that basis, to meet again on Monday, March 16, at 9:30 a.m., as the first of a series of meetings.

-- To discuss all problems related to the war. They will do so on the basis of their ten points, we on the basis of anything we choose, including our eight points.

-- If there is progress, we will ~~soon thereafter~~ appoint a successor to Ambassador Lodge.

It was also implicitly agreed that,

-- after we have discussed all the issues, and if we reach agreement, the other parties will be brought in to ratify it. It is not clear whether this will be done at the Majestic or at some other special meeting, and it is also not clear whether and how the Majestic sessions will be coordinated with our private negotiating process.

III. What Was New, or Dropped

-- They dropped their demand that the GVN be changed as a precondition to substantive talks, saying that this could be discussed later. Instead, they linked the change in the GVN variously to private GVN talks with the PRG, to the ratification process, and to gestures of U.S. good will which could lead to a "rapid settlement." They implied that the main problem was not the composition of the GVN per se but the PRG's refusal to deal with Thieu, Ky and Khiem, and the GVN's possible unwillingness to accept an agreement and abide by it.

-- They did not use the word "unconditional" when speaking of U.S. withdrawals, and did not challenge me when I said we would discuss the withdrawal of all non-South Vietnamese forces.

-- When I spoke of "reciprocity," they did not argue. Xuan Thuy even said that we would "meet each other" on the road to peace.

-- There was little emphasis on a coalition government, or any suggestion that we had to accept one as a precondition to talks.

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-- They stressed that they wanted an overall settlement, a "package."

-- They also stated flatly that now is the time to negotiate one.

IV. Significance

-- It was clearly a significant meeting. While it is still very hard to assess their objectives, they seem to want very much to get some exchange of views in a private forum separate from the Majestic sessions, and they appear prepared to pay the price of dropping their preconditions and perhaps some of their more extreme demands. But our positions are still very far apart, and we must expect that once they have got us talking they will prove tough for at least a while. In the past, the first meetings with them in a new channel have often sounded more promising than was justified by the results of later meetings.

-- They have accepted a procedure which has a built-in time pressure that may work to their disadvantage. They know they cannot keep this channel going very long if they do not offer anything new. At the present frequency of meetings, they cannot get agreement in the near future unless they make some progress in at least one of every few meetings.

-- They appear worried about Vietnamization, because if it succeeds they have lost and if it fails we may keep some forces there a long time.

-- They showed some concern about whether we would live up to an agreement, which provides a piece of evidence that they are at least thinking ahead to the real possibility of a settlement.

-- There are ~~faint~~ suggestions that they may be ready to talk seriously about troop withdrawal, on a reciprocal basis.

-- They are entering discussions in an overall settlement without including the PRG or insisting as a condition of talks that the Saigon government be changed -- a key point for the PRG.

-- This has been an important meeting, certainly the most important since the beginning of your Administration and ~~perhaps~~ even since the beginning of the talks in 1968. It remains to be seen what will happen next, but the early clues suggest that the course is certainly worth pursuing seriously.

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-- They accepted the condition for the appointment of a new Ambassador.

-- Their omission of the word unconditional from their demand for U.S. withdrawal suggests that they are ready to pay some price.

-- They may be in a hurry to reach some agreement, since they indicated several ~~things~~ times that they wanted a quick settlement.

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